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Architecture and Architectural Education: Change, Ethics and Liberal Education

Abstract

Architecture is: About people and places Meeting utilitarian needs Inescapable art The design of space Structures that make space Free thought and ideas History and cultural heritage Student definitions from the first day of class in "An Introduction to Architecture" My thoughts on architecture and architectural education are propelled these days by two intersecting threads: 1) That of architecture as a cultural production; and 2) That of architecture's essentially ethical condition. This of course begs the questions: What, then, is meant by architecture as a cultural production? and: What is the nature of that ethical condition? Also, for me, 3) Architectural education shares the larger objectives of a liberal education. An assertion which also raises a following question: What does that mean to you? The path begins with a consideration of the Change and Unchanging circumstances within which we find ourselves.

Keywords

architectural education, architectural ethics, architecture and liberal education

Disciplines

Architectural History and Criticism | Architectural Technology | Architecture | Historic Preservation and Conservation | Urban, Community and Regional Planning

Comments

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Architecture and Architectural Education: Change, Ethics and Liberal Education

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© Gregory Palermo. These notes were prepared at the invitation of the University of Illinois-Urbana/Champaign in January 2000. Limited distribution; not previously published. Looking back from 2017, the observations here still hold validity. Moreover, since 2000, at least a half-dozen monographs on architectural ethics have been published in the US and UK. And, finally, the over-arching Theme Topic and Conference Title for the 106th Annual Meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture in 2018 is at last: "*The Ethical Imperative!*" KEY WORDS: "architectural education" "architectural ethics" "architecture and liberal education"

Architecture is:

- About people and places
- Meeting utilitarian needs
- Inescapable art
- The design of space
- Structures that make space
- Free thought and ideas
- History and cultural heritage

Student definitions from the first day of class in
"An Introduction to Architecture"

My thoughts on architecture and architectural education are propelled these days by two intersecting threads:

- 1) **That of architecture as a cultural production;** and
- 2) **That of architecture's essentially ethical condition.**

This of course begs the questions: What, then, is meant by architecture as a cultural production? and: What is the nature of that ethical condition? Also, for me,

- 3) **Architectural education shares the larger objectives of a liberal education.**

An assertion which also raises a following question: What does that mean to you?

The path begins with a consideration of the Change and Unchanging circumstances within which we find ourselves.

Change Circumstance

We are awash with change prognostications that have now become ubiquitous:

- 1) All of the people who will turn 21, reaching young adulthood, during the first fifth of the 21st-C are already here. We know their race and ethnicity, can map their location and living standards, and make projections about their need for educational facilities and employment opportunities, and, almost as clearly, how they will procreate. The dominant figure of the previous millennium, the white European male, is
- 2) Sustainability will continue to be a major question as our numbers increase, as the press toward increased living standards continues, as the capacity of 'Spaceship Earth', to borrow a phrase from Buckminster Fuller, is ever more accurately determinable.²
- 3) As much as we have come into the information age and the computer age in the final quarter of the 20th-C, it seems the pace will quicken in the

already a distinct minority in numbers, if not yet having relinquished power (consider Russia's and China's interest in joining the G-6 economic powers).¹

early 21st-C, reaching into more facets of our lives, giving us virtually unfettered freedom (even as privacy is eliminated, e.g., a mountain of data already exists regarding most Americans in credit bureau, insurance, and banking computers) to create and participate in unfettered virtual experiences.

- 4) The events of business and everyday life will become even more international and diverse; we will more than ever negotiate a world of interdependent difference -- that is, a global marketplace where peoples of differing races, cultures, languages and nationalities come together for presumably mutual advantage ("In 1964 there was one TV for every 20 humans. Now there is one for every four. There are more TVs than refrigerators in Brazil.").³
- 5) Architecture, whatever its formal inclinations, will continue to explode with 'new' practices and forms: e.g., in the media utilized to generate form and represent design (e.g., ACADIA, the Association for Computer Aided Design in Architecture, did not exist 10 years ago, and its first national design competition with ACSA and AIA endorsement was held during the 1998-99 academic year⁴); in the internationalization of practice (the inaugural feature on international architecture and the 50 largest international practice firms in *Architecture* magazine was the October 1997 issue); in the conformation of firms and service networks (group practices in different cities, states and nations linked by computers and the internet, international associations of all sorts); and in relationships among the activities of strategic thinking, designing, building and evaluating the environment (e.g., in the seven years 1990-96, the ratio of the traditional design services of schematic design through construction administration declined from 78% to 60% of architectural firm billings. Planning and pre-design, post-construction, and construction services increased from 18% to 33% of billings.⁵).

There are more trends: those of urbanization, commodification of image, and genetic engineering of life, for example. What we are upon, and will remain upon for some time, is a radical sea of change.

While the rate of our inventiveness and its impact on our perceptions of ourselves and the world continues at a dizzying pace, we humans remain -- well -- *human*! Wherever we are at this moment, whatever our race, gender or cultural background, *we are there*, some *place*. We are *in* architecture. *Being somewhere* is inescapable. The questions are not, perhaps, "What will be changing?", for much of this is clear, but: "What will remain virtually unchanged?" And, a correlated question: "What spaces do the practices of architecture occupy in the interstices among the change dynamics and the unchanging?"

"Unchanging" Circumstance

A quote from a client captures some of the preceding notions of change, stasis and the space of architecture: "Draw it for me -- I need to think about it for a year!" It collects three ideas fundamental to architecture. The first is our *human-ness*: our capacity to invent, envision and represent (*to Draw*), and our desire to reflect upon things in making decisions (*I Need To Think About It*). The second is *place*: the *It* of the quote in both locations is an expansion to a garden and house, a change intended for betterment of the home -- both the concept of it and the real thing. The third is *time*: in this case, a *year*. Architecture takes place in time -- time for thought and construction and inhabitation -- and endures through time. Collectively taken: human-ness, place and time comprise an underlying "unchanging" foundation to architecture.

1) That Architecture Is a Cultural Production

Beginning with those thoughts, I expand to a more complete, yet still brief definition: That architecture is the cultural enterprise of modifying and fabricating anew the landscape for enhanced human inhabitation of that landscape. Taking this apart:

"Cultural": embodies the notions that architecture is a social, political, economic, collective, collaborative act. We can postulate the origins of architecture, the first invention of place making, but we are not in that condition at present. As shown in recent Texaco commercials, we are willing to travel to the ends of the earth, to enter its most pristine

untouched environments to mine it for resources to sustain contemporary global inhabitation. Thus, to build at all, demands recognition not of architecture's autonomy as art, but its fundamental messiness as cultural production.

"Enterprise" here includes the action of architecture: assessment of circumstance, the decision to make an environmental change, to invent, to design, to discourse, to debate, to propose, to represent those proposals. Enterprise touches less upon the past than looking to the future. "Enter" and "pris(z)e" are present in the thought. This enterprise is an enterprise of "we", of many, of diversity, not of singularity or the hermetic "I wanted to . . .".

"Modifying and fabricating anew": we are here amidst the results of 10,000 years of continuous post-Neolithic construction. When we build, fundamentally, we are re-arranging our habitat. Building is always the contingent act of modifying what exists: thus it demands deep inquiry into what is here, and the impact of the change. Fabrication, with its roots in weaving is an earlier word for construction: we are indeed weaving new stuff into the fabric of what is here. And we are constructing it. The event of making a thing like a building or a garden, or a road, or a fence or a chair results in the newness of the post-making circumstance. In Sartre's sense that it is in making the choices of life that we are constructing not only our own humanity but *humanity*, so too, here, in changing and building the landscape, we are not only making a particular place, but also *architecture*.

"Landscape" has several scales from vast largely unmodified tracts, to the table top. The landscape in J. B. Jackson's sense is place possessed and marked by humanity's presence. It is this landscape in which we each particularly find ourselves at this or any other moment, even if we are dreaming or are virtually somewhere else in a information technology swoon. Thus, even if we only see our present landscape as a place of departure, it is here. This is the landscape we modify to suit ourselves.

"Enhanced human inhabitation" is the central issue. This is the quick: we change the landscape for an alternative spatial place formulation that enriches our individual and common lives. Security, and safety and utility are a part of this enhancement. But more to the issue is poetic satisfaction of the

mind and spirit. Thus the architecture of social institutions, of defense, of memorials, of dwelling all have places in the duality of utility and poetic content. Art has its role; utopic consideration has its role; 'mere utility' is impossible, for most of what we make functions: it is the manner made that counts. Architecture is not an autonomous art form: it is socially embedded art. It is this objective of 'enhanced life quality' from which architecture obtains is ethical core: it shares with other ethical endeavors, the search for the 'good' in human affairs.

"Of that landscape." Architecture is particular in its origination: made by a particular people, in a particular place, at a particular time. For Hans-Georg Godamer, this particularity of the "occasion" of architecture's (and other "occasional" art such as "portraits or poems dedicated to someone") origination is the first source of its "significance." However long the original artifact remains in tact, while the circumstance of origination is not fully realizable, there is a trace of origination and significance which the mind and perception recognize, even as we experience it directly in our own time. Architecture then "mediates .. past and present." Godamer observes:

"A work of architecture . . . is as much determined by the aim which it is to serve as by the place that it is to take up in a total spatial context. ... Through this dual ordering the building presents a true increase of being: it is a work of art. It is not a work of art if it simply stands anywhere, as a building that is a blot on the landscape, but only if it represents the solution of a building problem. ... A building is never primarily a work of art. Its purpose, through which it belongs in the context of life, cannot be separated from itself without losing some of its reality. If it has become merely an object of the aesthetic consciousness, then it has merely a shadowy reality and lives a distorted life only in the degenerate form of an object of interest to tourists, or a subject for photography."⁶

The definition of architecture with which we began militates against univalent definitions of architecture being a compositional art of space and structure, or of forms in light, or being the science of

problem solving. All forms and solutions are consequential, never neutral, and bear the weight of power and authority and choice from which they originated, and with which they are imbued in hindsight.

2) Architecture's Essentially Ethical Condition

Architecture has been conceptualized here as the study of, speculation about, design of, and construction of humanity's places of inhabitation. Those places and the manner of inhabitation utilize resources, frame spaces for various uses, shelter us from the elements, and symbolize our institutions. Five Precepts are proposed through which to examine the essential ethical nature of architecture:

Δ1. Purposefulness. Architecture is grounded in human intention and purpose. It is therefore subject, as are other human affairs, to judgment with respect to its intentions: who and what purposes are served by those intentions, how well those intentions are met. These are not only practical or utilitarian judgments, but also ethical. For example, intentions and purposes may be beneficial or good (a day care center) or harmful or evil (a genocide machine). They may serve the interests of despots, dictators, military juntas, or democracies; they may serve the interests of powerful individuals against the public interest; and they may displace or marginalize the weak, or the discriminated against (ghettos still exist). Ethical judgment may need to be reached in evaluating architectural project intentions and purposes. Beyond intent and purpose, judgment of how well intentions and purposes are met through architecture is a measure of relative merit or goodness of the built result -- 'goodness', in this sense, being the ethical virtue of the work.

Δ2. Material Production. Architecture is a material production.⁷ The built inhabited landscape tends to be large and demands many resources for its accomplishment. Once having been built, even ephemeral portable architecture such as teepee's or yurts have a physical and enduring presence, even if only for a short period of time at any one place. Material production uses common resources; those resources may be used well or wastefully (more than one society has made itself extinct due to desertification of its locale). Constructions may be built

safely to endure winds and rain, and earthquakes, and gravity, or they may be constructed poorly endangering our lives (the penalty in Hammurabi's 17th-C BCE *Code*, Section 229, for building collapse killing someone was for the builder to be killed⁸). When designing and building, an ethical duty is incurred with respect to resources utilized and sustainable conceptions of life, and with respect to personal physical safety.

Δ3. Aesthetic Virtue. The third precept is that of aesthetics: architecture's relationship to art, its being an art, and its relationship to the philosophy of art and aesthetics, the beautiful and the sublime, and human flourishing. This may be the most debated issue of ethics in architecture, because for many it is the self-aware 'art'fulness of architecture, the desire to make 'beautiful' buildings, that differentiates 'architecture' from 'mere building'. In its role of giving form, appearance, image and meaning to societal expectations, aspirations or needs, we look to discern architecture's aesthetic virtue.

Architecture, being a material production, results in things, artifacts. One might say that by its very existence and inhabitation, by its duration, even if brief, that a building's practical intents have been met. What differentiates buildings -- architecture -- as what differentiates other artifactual productions, then, is not the level of service but their aesthetic character, their beauty, aesthetics being: supportive of and/or essential to human well being and/or a discrete presentation of reality or being (depending upon the philosophical position being taken).

In all cases, aesthetics and beauty matter: either as art per se, or as a beneficial contribution to happiness or flourishing. Thus, a building's aesthetic embodiment is a part of its virtue, its ethical value. In the developmental line sketched here, a building's perfection is interdependent upon purpose, material and aesthetic goodness. these are expressly not the language nor the meaning of Vitruvius' "utility•firmness•beauty" triad.

Δ4. Architecture's Rhetoric and Ideologies. The fourth lens of ethical consideration is that from within architecture's rhetoric and ideologies. I will use a few examples of design driven ideologies to illustrate this perspective.

As early as Horatio Greenough in the 1840's, observers in America were calling for a 'true American architecture', one that would cast off Europe's formal iconic precedents and which would emerge from American climate, functional necessities (the settlement of America, its commerce and the construction of its institutions), and expression.⁹ These themes are later taken up and find manifestation through Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, whose work bridging the 19th- and 20th-centuries stands in contradistinction to the impact of the 1893 Chicago Exposition which was still looking to the European Beaux Arts for formal sources.

The Modern Movement's intentions in the first half of the 20th-century were profoundly ethical: to make an architecture of the modern era, to utilize technology of its time, to discard the historical styles and academic architecture, and to address social projects such as worker's housing. When combined, these strategies were to sweep aside capitalist bourgeois class restrictions and to make a more egalitarian society, using architecture as a vehicle to give it form and expression. Whatever its naiveté viewed in hindsight, this was an ethical stance. Even though after the Museum of Modern Art exhibition of 1931 the aesthetic of modernism was usurped as an object of connoisseurship and adopted by the modern corporation (exactly opposite its original objectives), many of its intentions continue to have ethical merit.¹⁰

Another ideology with ethical force is that of sustainable design, designing in resource-conserving ways, and with materials and methods that slow the degradation of resources, so that future generations will have a world to inhabit. This is now a growing force in the direction taken by contemporary architecture.

In the Greenough, Wright, Sullivan, Modern Movement, and environmental sustainability ideologies interlocking intentions, social-political-economic-cultural threads and formal strategies to support them are proposed as the premises for a 'true architecture': architecture with an explicit intent to make the world better through design -- an ethical architecture. Other conceptual positions, relying upon the relationship of architecture to power, so-

cial elites, controlling mores, and upon architecture's potency to construct order (while simultaneously excluding 'others') frame additional aspects of the ethical in architecture that are linked to rhetoric and ideology.¹¹

In addition to ethics which arise from *design* ideologies, there are ethics that may arise from *process* ideologies -- such as the philosophy that architecture is a 'problem solving process', or that public architecture ought to be the result of 'public participatory design processes', each of which implies methods and means that have an ethical import.

Design and process rhetoric and ideologies, which speak to architecture's purposes, aesthetics and methodologies, define the discipline. Understanding those definitions and acting from them is another basic framework for considering architecture's ethics.

Δ5. Praxis, (action, practice; *spec.* the practice of a technical subject or art, as opp. to or arising out of the theory of it; an example or a collection of examples used for practice in a subject¹²). Architecture is a practice, or a collection of practices, an art. As such, the practitioner is obliged to master the discipline: its history and theory, its technological foundations, its order of beauty and formal conception, the order of designing and speculation which is part of architecture, its impact on human well being and the satisfaction of intended purpose, processes of involvement and contribution, and its representational and symbolizing capacity. To do otherwise is to not practice architecture well; to practice without virtue. Virtue is here used in the sense that the contemporary philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has recaptured from Aristotle: that of the virtuous practice of a discipline which defines its content, quality and ends, and which therefore can be judged regarding its ethical merit. This applies to both the actions of practice and the resultant works of practice.

Many seemingly everyday events in architectural practices are ethical in their import: business and marketing choices (deciding on what projects to undertake, with whom to work, the values of each etc.); design deliberations and critiques (function, aesthetics, concepts); budgets (durability of architecture, value for expenditure); client and contractor interactions (honoring contracts, fairness,

trust and advising); contracts (equitable conditions, value for service, mutual respect and duties); public presentations (who has the right to know and be advised about projects); and staff development and recognition. Embedded within these events are ethical questions. Duties to self, the client, the general public, and to the discipline itself can clearly be traced. They are ethical, and demand an ethics. It is in the particular questions, in particular circumstances, that architecture's ethics are shaped. When we pull the threads on one of these everyday concerns what unravels are the deepest questions and premises of the discipline.

Interlude

The making of architecture is an ethical event; the architecture made, constructed ethics.

3) Architectural Education and Liberal Education

For me, a liberal education is rich in the spectrum of ideas and disciplines explored; is one in which learning how to go about learning is initiated; in which sloppiness or casualness as opposed to intensity and engagement do not have a place; is one in which curiosity is fostered; in which a climate to attempt what is just beyond reach is maintained; and one in which significant partial accomplishment or significant failure of risk-laden attempts is valued. A school of liberal education is a community of scholars engaged in the exchange, production, and invention of knowledge and ideas -- albeit that some of the scholars may be granted the title professor and others named student: they all must be scholars.

Architectural education in our time will of necessity be framed in the terms of our time: exploring architectural history and precedent to date; developing a knowledge base of architecture's rhetoric, ideologies and theories; developing methods of design and invention; utilizing emerging technologies; rethinking the cultural heritage of the West and its position in a compressed diverse world; mastering a respect for, and basic understanding of, the material and productive technologies through which architecture is realized; nurturing greater understanding of global sustainability; understanding contempo-

rary conditions of practice and professionalism; fostering collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches to addressing environmental design questions; searching for forms of these times and those of the near future rather than seeking comfort in nostalgia; developing a capacity to invent architectural space and form. These are beginning points. The specific relevance of many of them will fade. The larger ambition of recognizing the manifestly rich and ethical role that architecture plays in life, and continuous self-motivated learning about architecture is what will prevail.

I trust that the lack of discussion of: the specific unique pedagogical power of the architectural studio; the role of information technology in the generation of form and the nature of practice and pedagogy; the issues of social pluralism; architecture as an 'Art'; architecture as a problem solving science; specifics about accreditation standards or preparation for the practicing profession; the need for better communication and leadership skills; the role university education holds for internship; or the skills, competencies, and specific bodies of knowledge to be mastered, has not left you disappointed. These are for individual architectural education programs, accrediting and licensing bodies to consider. Rather than a school of thought about particular approaches to form and invention or processes, foster the outlined more inclusive values and ambitions within which the multi-faceted particulars can be framed and evaluated.

Notes:

1. Change topics one through four are widely discussed in public and popular media. A well prepared consistent source is the *National Geographic* millennium series referenced here. For information related to this summary see "Population," Millennium in Maps Series, *National Geographic*, Oct. 1998. The Oct. 1998 issue of *National Geographic* contains related articles on "Human Migration," "Women and Population," and "Feeding the Planet."
2. For two articles addressing climate and life sustainability see Curt Supplee, "Unlocking the Climate Puzzle," photo. Joanna B. Pinneo, *National Geographic*, May 1998, 38-71; and Virginia Morell, "The Variety of Life," photo. Frans Lanting, *National Geographic*, Feb. 1999, 6-87

3. "Cultures," Millennium in Maps, *National Geographic*, August 1999, quote from "A Small World After All" caption. For related discussion see Erla Zwingle, "A World Together: Goods move. People move. Ideas move. And culture changes," photo. Joe McNally, *National Geographic*, Aug. 1999, 6-33
4. Michael Berk, Peter Andres and Michael Tardif, "A Library for the Information Age," *AIArchitect*, 6: Sep. 1999, 13
5. Kermit Barker, "Firms Expand Service Offerings," *AIArchitect*, 4: July 1997, 1 & 4
6. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative," in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 134
7. Stating that architecture is material production does not deny the critical power of architectural thought and speculation. It is only that such speculation in drawing, text, modeling, film and other media and virtual reality simulation is *architectural* -- of architecture -- and a stimulation to imagination, but it is not architecture.
8. Hammurabi, King of Babylonia, *The Hammurabi Code and the Sinaitic Legislation*, trans. Chilperic Edwards, 1904; reprint, Port Washington, NY/London: Kennikat Press, 1971
9. Horatio Greenough, *Form and Function: Remarks on Art, Design and Architecture*, ed. Harold A. Small, introduction by Erle Loran, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947 & 1966
10. Robert Twombly addresses this in *Power and Style: A Critique of Twentieth-Century Architecture in the United States*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1996, 52-88. The MOMA exhibition publication coined the phrase "International Style" and applied it to the modern architecture that had emerged in Europe 1918-1930. Colin Rowe explores modernism's program and style in *The Architecture of Good Intentions: Towards A Possible Retrospect*, New York/London: Academy Editions, 1994
11. Joining Ulrich Conrads' classic *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, trans. Michael Bullock, Cambridge: MIT Press, c. 1970, are four new compendiums of short texts that provide fertile ground for initial exploration of architecture's moral intents through its ideologies and rhetoric: Joan Ockman, ed., *Architecture Culture 1943-1968: A Documentary Anthology*, with the collaboration of E. Eigen, A Columbia Book of Architecture, New York: Rizzoli, 1993; Kate Nesbitt, ed., *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, c. 1996; Jay Stein & Kent Spreckelmeyer, ed., *Classic Readings in Architecture*, New York: WCB/McGraw Hill, c. 1999; and *Architecture Theory Since 1968*, ed. K. Michael Hays, A Columbia Book of Architecture, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.
12. *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993)

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